

Richard C. Lee Courthouse

141 Church Street
New Haven, CT 06510

The Richard C. Lee U.S. Courthouse, formerly known as the New Haven U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, is located on Church Street facing the Green. The courthouse is bound by Church Street to the west, a pedestrian right-of-way (formerly Court Street) to its north, a pedestrian and restricted vehicular-use plaza to its east, a vehicular access drive to its south. The building is 11 bays wide by 14 bays deep, with three stories above a low basement. The site is of relatively even grade, with the principal and service entrances of the first floor located approximately three feet above grade.

Hours: Monday - Friday, 7:00 am - 5:00 pm

Public Transportation: Metro North State Street Station, Connecticut Transit bus service, and local cab companies. There is also a free downtown shuttle that circles the main areas.

Parking: Metered parking, parking garages, and parking lots are available nearby.

Concessions: There are no cafeterias or concessions in the building, but there are numerous delis and restaurants close by.

ATM: There is no ATM in the building, but two banks are located adjacent to the building.

Landmark Status: Eligible for the national Register of Historic Places.



The Church Street side of the Richard C. Lee Courthouse



Richard C. Lee Courthouse

Exterior

The rectangular-shaped building occupies nearly the entire site. A continuous areaway at the north, and window wells at the south, allow daylight into the basement level. The west steps cover storage vaults. Original masonry openings to basement spaces below the former east loading dock have been filled in.

The building is organized around the former post office workroom, original courtroom (No. 3), and courtyard. The former workroom space, which occupied the entire central area of the first floor and mezzanine levels and east end of the first floor, has been subdivided with new courtroom, meeting, office, circulation and mechanical rooms. The original courtroom and light court retain their original volumes. Offices, meeting rooms, and toilets are located at the building's north, south and east perimeter, reached by single- and double-loaded corridors. The basement, originally support space for postal employees, storage and mechanical space, has been partially converted to office use. Designed in 1913 by James Gamble Rogers, the Courthouse ranks among the most distinguished of New Haven's public buildings. Its imposing classically-inspired exterior remains much the same as originally constructed, and within the building, many original volumes and features survive. The conversion of the former post office spaces to new courtrooms, offices and support spaces, and upgrading of mechanical systems throughout the building, completed in 1985, has had little effect upon lobbies, stair halls and architecturally important spaces above the first floor.

The Classical Revival style of architecture chosen for the Richard C. Lee U.S. Courthouse was commonly used for federal building design during the early twentieth century because officials believed it conveyed the dignity of the federal government. The courthouse displays several hallmarks of the style, including the colossal portico (entrance porch with columns) and pediment (triangular gable end). The columns have Corinthian capitals with carved eagles and leaves. Niches flank the portico. The exterior of the building is clad in Tennessee marble, and the exterior stairs are pink Milford granite. Bronze window sashes, grilles, and the revolving doors provide contrast to the pale gray exterior.

Important citizens in New Haven's history inspired the inscriptions on the exterior. The frieze contains words from a sermon delivered by Reverend John Davenport in 1639: "Wisdom hath builded her house; she hath hewn out her seven pillars." Davenport was referring to the seven men who were selected to serve as the first General Court, and their names are inscribed on the building. The upper walls of the interior light court were incised with the names of five other prominent New Haven citizens and three military heroes. A carved band tops the building and includes coquillage, which are stylized seashells. An acroterion, the ornament at the apex of the gable, is also a stylized shell.



An early photo of the Lee Courthouse



The entrance

Richard C. Lee Courthouse

Interior

The interior retains many original features and rich finishes. Marble floors and pilasters (attached columns) are found in the ornate entrance lobby. The coffered (recessed) ceiling is intricately detailed with rosettes. The interior wall contains an elaborate bronze screen that led to the original postal workroom. Other original features that remain include writing desks, radiator grilles, and pendant light fixtures, which were specially designed by Rogers.

The walls of the main stair and elevator lobbies are clad in the same Tennessee marble as the exterior. However, the marble was finished to reveal more pink tones. Ceilings in this area are vaulted plaster overlaid with gold leaf. Ornate bronze elevator fronts and grilles remain.

On the second floor, the courtroom lobby is lined with twenty monolithic, Tennessee marble columns with bronze scrolled Ionic capitals. Marble flooring, wainscot, and benches contribute to the opulent finishes. A plaster cornice and coffered ceiling are painted in tones derived from the marble.

In a 1919 article featured in *“Architectural Forum”* the courtroom was described as a “dignified, sumptuous room of perfect acoustic qualities.” The lavish wall treatments combine fluted pilasters and paneling in quarter-sawn white oak that was stained a light olive color. The ornate plaster cornice and ceiling beams are finished to resemble the oak walls and highlighted with gold leaf.

www.gsa.gov



The second floor courtroom lobby



New England Region

Richard C. Lee Courthouse

Tenants

Lee Courthouse Directory

U.S. Marshal Service

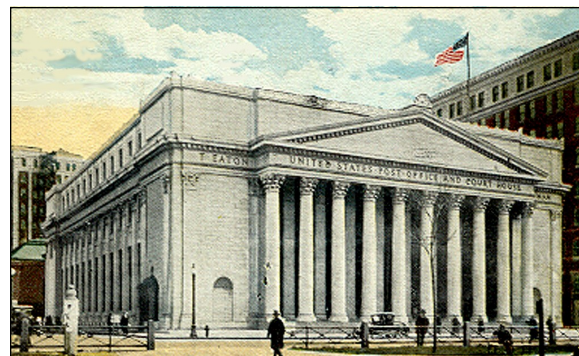
U.S. District Court, District of Connecticut

Richard C. Lee Courthouse

History

James Gamble Rogers designed the building, which was constructed between 1913 and 1919 on the New Haven Green. Rogers was also the architect for structures at Yale University, his alma mater. The building was the last to be designed under the auspices of the Tarsney Act (1890 - 1912), which allowed the Treasury Department to hire private architects rather than use only designers employed by the federal government.

Established in 1638 and one of the earliest European urban planning efforts in the American colonies, the New Haven Green has long been a location for important civic buildings. In 1910, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Cass Gilbert, two of the most prominent designers working in America at the time, produced a city planning document for New Haven. They advised that the style, materials, and scale of the new courthouse and post office should respect the character of existing public buildings around the Green, and Rogers achieved these goals. The courthouse and is a handsome example of the Beaux Arts style. It remains a remarkably intact monument of the symbolic value of Federal buildings as lasting monuments to democracy. The style, granite materials, and height of the building all respect the established character of the area.



An antique postcard of the Richard C. Lee Courthouse

A cornerstone dedication ceremony was held in 1914. Former President William Howard Taft, then a professor at Yale Law School, spoke at the event, and the text of his speech was placed in the cornerstone, along with other mementos.

The courthouse was slated for demolition in the 1960s as part of an urban renewal plan. However, a coalition of Federal judges and local historic preservationists rallied to save it. After much negotiation, the landmark was restored in the early 1980s at a cost of \$7.3 million. Although some interior spaces were modified, the restoration respected the original character, and many historic components remain intact. In 1998, the building was renamed to honor Richard C. Lee, a former New Haven Mayor who was a pivotal figure in the building's preservation as well as the city's revitalization.

Remarkably, very few alterations were made to the building throughout the years. By 1980, however, it had fallen into disrepair. From 1982 to 1985, it underwent a massive renovation and restoration. The work respected historic integrity while updating spaces to meet the needs of the courts and safety requirements.

In 2003, it was refurbished again with the intent to revitalize the appearance of this Classical Revival style structure. The emphasis was placed on restoring the existing windows, masonry and portico structure. Upon completion, the building was devoted to the Judiciary and the Department of Justice. Richard Lee was the mayor of New Haven and in 1954, when cities began to suffer deterioration as a result of the middle-class exodus to the suburbs, he attempted to stem the tide with one of the earliest major urban renewal projects.

In 1998, the Courthouse and Post Office was named after Richard C. Lee.



Richard C. Lee Courthouse

Richard C. Lee, the former mayor of New Haven

Richard Charles Lee was born on March, 12, 1916. He grew up in a cold-water apartment in the working-class Newhallville neighborhood. After high school, Mr. Lee took a job as a reporter with *The New Haven Journal-Courier* after bluffing his way through an interview.

At 21 he became a member of the Democratic Party. Soon he was elected an alderman and helped draft the first budget for the city's Planning Commission. After winning three more terms and, in 1943, after a medical discharge from the Army because of ulcers, Mr. Lee was hired by Yale University, first to handle its wartime news digest and later to head its public relations bureau. It was there that he learned to connect with people from every walk of life.

After two failed mayoral campaigns—the second of which he lost by two votes—Mr. Lee beat the Republican mayor in 1954 and kept the job for 16 years, still a New Haven record. But New Haven was a city that was losing its industrial job base and whose inner city was expanding. One of his first actions was to convene a committee of residents to come up with ways to reinvent New Haven, a northeastern city that despite Mr. Lee's emphasis on redevelopment has continued to struggle with more than its share of poverty and unemployment.

"We are taking the town out of the 18th century and projecting it into the 21st," he once told his constituents. He was a pragmatist who knew who to get to know and how to get things done. In 1957, John F. Kennedy, then in the Senate, traveled to New Haven to campaign for Mr. Lee. To shore up New Haven's large Italian electorate, the mayor brought in Rocky Marciano, the boxer. He won that election by a two-to-one margin. By the end of the 1950s, New Haven was receiving far more federal aid per capita than any other city in the county.

Mr. Lee was an intuitive, street-smart politician with a keen eye for public relations. He became the driving force behind many of the city's largest building projects. As mayor from 1954 to 1970, Mr. Lee, a Democrat, leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars from the state and federal governments to raze blighted city neighborhoods, feats documented in national magazines and newspapers. His urban renewal programs in the 1950s and 1960s earned national recognition and created a template for decades of future city revitalization projects. Under his leadership, a shopping center and a sports and music coliseum were built downtown, and a path was cleared for the construction of the Interstate highways that put his city at the crossroads of southern New England.



Richard C. Lee Courthouse

Green Initiatives

In 2010 as part of the Recovery Act the existing roof was replaced with a new cool-roof system.

Other environmentally-friendly features include:

- Smart metering (records consumption of electricity, gas, and water for monitoring purposes)
- New exterior lighting
- Green purchasing practices